

Common Sentence Errors

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Every time you write sentences, you need to watch for certain types of errors. **For example:**

- disagreement between the subject and verb
- non-parallelism of lists, actions, and clauses
- dangling participles and other errors of word order
- sentence fragments
- adjective and adverb confusion
- comma splices
- and many other possible errors

There are many different types of sentence errors, and each student will make different ones.

These various sentence problems are too numerous to cover completely here, but they are addressed individually in our one-on-one writing courses.

Let's highlight the most common types of sentence errors to watch out for.

Subject-Verb Disagreement

The subject of a sentence should always "match" the type of verb used to describe the action the subject performs.

Incorrect: He **walk** the dog.

Correct: He **walks** the dog.

Incorrect: They **bats** the ball.

Correct: They **bat** the ball.

The confusion usually comes with "he/she"
types of subjects:

First Person:

- 1) I - run
- 2) you - run
- 3) he/she - runs

Second Person:

- 1) we - run
- 2) you - run
- 3) they - run

Other examples of subject-verb agreement:

- 1) Two subjects, both singular, connected by "or" or "nor:"

"Neither the dog **nor** the cat **is** allowed on the bed."

- 2) Singular and plural subjects connected by "or" or "nor" (plural comes second, and takes plural verb):

"Neither the dog **nor** the cats **are** allowed on the bed."

*The rule with **or** and **nor** is to match the verb to the closest noun.*

Parallelism

When you write a sentence, two or more parts of the sentence that do the same thing should have structures that match. Their structures should be **parallel**.

This applies most clearly when you use more than one verb in the sentence, but it applies also to clauses and other words that perform similar functions.

Let's have a look at some examples.

Parallelism Errors in Verbs

Incorrect: I like to play, to sing, and drawing.

Correct: I like to play, to sing, and to draw.

You could leave out the "to" in the second and third verbs, because the first "to" would cover them all. But as you see, you could not say "I like to can draw."

Can you see the parallelism error in the following sentence?

He is good at skating and to play baseball.

Other Parallelism Errors: Either/Or

Incorrect: We must **either** raise more money **or** it will be necessary to cut expenses.

Correct: We must either **raise more money** or **cut expenses**.

Phrases connected by "either/or" (or "neither/nor") must be parallel in structure.

Other Parallelism Errors: Incorrect Prepositions

Some parallelism errors arise when words take different prepositions, even if the words perform the same function.

Incorrect: She is interested and excited about the film.

"Interested" and "excited" are similar adjectives, but take different prepositions. You can say "excited about" but not "interested about."

Correct: She is interested **in** and excited **about** the film.

Dangling Participles and Other Modifying Phrases

After we write a noun or verb in a sentence, we often add other words or phrases that **describe**, or **modify**, those words.

Example: "Wearing a long blue dress, the lady walked into the room."

"Lady" is the **subject** of the sentence, and "wearing a long blue dress" **modifies** or **describes** that subject.

An Example of a Modifying Phrase

Example: "The phone rang after I left the room."

The basic sentence: "The phone rang."

Subject: "phone"

Verb: "rang"

The phrase, "after I left the room" **modifies the verb**, "rang," by telling you when the action took place.

The Most Important Detail About these Modifying Phrases

A modifying phrase will **always be very close** to the word it modifies.

In the first example, "wearing a long blue dress" came directly **before** "lady," the noun it modified.

In the second example, "after I left the room" came directly **after** "rang," the verb it modified.

It's an Error When Something Comes Between a
Modifying Phrase and the Word it Modifies
(And the errors can be very funny!)

Example: "I saw the building riding into town on
the bus."

- **Participial phrase:** "Riding into town on the bus"
- **Word it modifies:** "I" -- the subject.

Those two things should go together: "Riding into town on
the bus, I saw the building."

Can you spot the errors in these sentences?

Example 1: "She told me about her party in the elevator."

Example 2: "Watching the program, the TV lost power."

Example 3: "After eating their food, we petted the cats."

Here's a better way to write those sentences:

Example 1: "In the elevator, she told me about her party."

Example 2: "The TV lost power while we were watching the program."

Example 3: "We petted the cats after they ate their food."

Sentence Fragments

Remember that every complete sentence **must have** two components: a **subject** and a **verb**.

Examples: "I eat", "You walk", "They slept"

Sentences may also add an **object** of the verb, and words or phrases that **modify** nouns or verbs:

Example: "I slowly ate dinner."

What's wrong with these fragments?

Example: "Papers lying all over the place."

Problem: No obvious verb

Possible solution: "Papers (subject) were lying (verb) all over the place."

Example: "Because I dropped it."

Problem: Explaining why something is the case, but not telling us what that something is

Possible solution: "The vase (subject) broke (verb) because I dropped it."

Sometimes sentence fragments can be used to
create effective impact

Example: "She asked them to clean their
desks, but what did she find when she got
back? **Papers lying all over the place!**"

But this works only because we already know what the
fragment refers to.

*In a formal essay, fragments should **not** be used, and they
should be used **very sparingly** in other types of writing.*

Adjective and Adverb Confusion

Remember the definitions of each type of word:

Adjective: modifies a **noun** or **pronoun**; tells you its qualities

Adverb: modifies a **verb**, tells you **how** or **when** the action took place; also modifies an **adjective** or other **adverbs**

Sometimes people mix up the two types of modifiers, using them to describe the wrong type of word.

Examples of Adjective and Adverb Confusion

Incorrect: "She sings **loud**."

Correct: "She sings **loudly**."

Why? "Loud" is an **adjective** that describes the quality of a **noun** (in this case, the sound). "Loudly" is an **adverb** that describes **how** someone is singing.

Other Examples of Adjective and Adverb Confusion

Incorrect: "He walks **incredibly quick**."

Why? "Quick" is an adverb, modifying the verb "walks." It should therefore be "quickly." "Incredibly" is another adverb, modifying "quickly."

Incorrect: "You should be **real** careful."

Why? "Real" is an adverb, modifying the adjective "careful." So it should be "really."

Comma Splice

If you write two complete sentences, each one should end with a period.

However, you can join these sentences together and make one larger sentence, but **only if** you put a comma between them and use a conjunction, or joining word, like "and," "but," "or," "since," and so on.

*If two sentences are joined **without** both a comma and a conjunction, the result is called a **comma splice**.*

Examples of Comma Splices

Example: "I wrote my essay, I haven't turned it in."

This example is made of two different sentences:

Sentence #1: "I wrote my essay."

Sentence #2: "I haven't turned it in."

One way to make these into one sentence is to use the comma and a conjunction:

Example: "I wrote my essay, **but** I haven't turned it in."

The previous example might go unnoticed because the sentences were related to each other.

So let's use two unrelated sentences:

Example: "I wrote my essay, the dog bit me."

Sentence #1: "I wrote my essay."

Sentence #2: "The dog bit me."

Can you see how these two complete sentences can't go together in the example sentence? Let's fix the problem:

"I wrote my essay, **and then** the dog bit me."

Other types of sentence errors may involve:

- sequence of tenses
- shifting of pronouns
- logical comparisons
- coordination and subordination

Our one-on-one writing courses can help you overcome these and other sentence errors, to improve your writing, making it clearer and more interesting.

The end.

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